DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 403 623 CS 509 422

AUTHOR Osborn, Michael
TITLE The Enduring Heart of the Public Speaking Course.
PUB DATE Nov 96
NOTE 8p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Speech Communication Association (82nd, San Diego, CA, November 23-26, 1996).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Debate; Educational Objectives; Higher Education; *Individual Development; Introductory Courses; Learning Strategies; *Metaphors; Persuasive Discourse; *Public Speaking; Teaching Methods; Undergraduate Students
IDENTIFIERS *Speech Communication Education

ABSTRACT

The public speaking course has been around for a long time but, while there have been changes, the heart of the course remains intact. The many skills and sensitivities instructors try to cultivate in their students come together in three fundamental metaphors that may reflect deep tendencies in what is taught. In the first metaphor, student as builder, central to organizing ideas into a cohesive pattern are the arts of designing and building speeches, of learning the nature and range of supporting materials and what they can best support, and the strategies of outlining. A second metaphor involves the student as weaver, practicing the art of weaving symbols into the fabric of a speech and evidence and proof into the tapestry of powerful arguments. The third metaphor of student as climber expresses vividly a transformational approach to the public speaking class, with students--both speakers and listeners--growing and developing rapidly, expanding their horizons, when the course works successfully. The kind of personal growth experience the three metaphors encourage and guide is profoundly humanizing, and, as such, can serve as an antidote to the consumer metaphor in undergraduate education. (Contains 25 references.) (CR)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND
DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL
HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

M. Osborn

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES
INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION
CENTER (ERIC)

☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

ED 403 623

The Enduring Heart of the Public Speaking Course[1]

Michael Osborn
The University of Memphis

The public speaking course has been around a long time - - since the time of Protagoras if not before. That should tell us something, because time can be as cruel in academics as it is in life in general. If a subject is not useful, it will not endure. The presumption must be that the public speaking course - - oft maligned, usually underestimated, even resented - - is deeply useful. Over that long period of time, the course has adjusted itself to the immediate needs of various societies and peoples: in the English renaissance, merchants in the towns sought to magnify their new urban, monied power by teaching their children how to speak the language of their traditional "betters". As they appropriated the language of power, they put their own dynamic mark upon it. In our time, new technologies are transforming access to knowledge and expanding the resources of presentation available to us in oral utterance. Previously marginalized people have joined our audience and demand access to our podia, and by their very presence challenge the ways in which we adapt and offer our messages and ourselves. Now is an especially exciting and challenging time in the business of teaching public speaking. But the heart of our course remains intact - - to enhance our abilities to articulate our deepest needs and dreams before public gatherings and thereby, to enable our own becoming. Today I want to focus on this "heart of the course" that will surely endure into the new century and beyond, and to share with you a discovery we have made.

This year as we worked through revisions for the fourth edition of our textbook, Suzanne and I detected a basic pattern in the manuscript that had somehow eluded us before: the many skills and sensitivities we try to cultivate in our students come together in three fundamental metaphors that may reflect deep tendencies in what we teach. Thanks to the work of Kenneth Burke (1935/1984), I. A. Richards (1936), Lakoff and Johnson (1980), and many others, we now understand that such depth metaphors represent perspectives on their subjects, ingrained tendencies or habits of thinking. They are also powerful inventional tools, because they affect how we think and act. They are symptoms of and may provide glimpses into the underlying nature of the subjects they present .

These basic metaphors emerged as we discussed three subjects: organizing ideas into a cohesive pattern, combining symbols and persuasive elements into convincing presentations, and overcoming the personal challenges of communicating.

The metaphor that emerged as we discussed organizing ideas was **the student as builder.** This is actually a traditional figure in the literature of our field (Griffin, 1960). But it is no less important for its familiarity. We express the spirit of this metaphor, and the vital cluster of skills and sensitivities it represents, as we introduce it in our book:

> Our home on the Tennessee River stands at the top of a ridgeline several hundred feet above the river. It is built upon ground that slopes down at about a 45 degree angle, so that while the front of the home rests upon solid earth, the back of it rises on posts some thirty feet above the terrain. You might think that the structure is

CS509423

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

> flimsy, but actually it is quite strong. Our builders selected the finest wood, concrete, plastics, and steel available. And, they knew how to fashion and combine these materials into powerful supports.
>
> . . . . In these next chapters, we . . . look at your speeches as a structure of ideas raised up on solid pillars of supporting materials. Like our builders, you must know your materials and what they can support. You need to know how to select them and how to use them wisely. Just as our home is built to withstand storms and high winds, your speech must be built to withstand doubt and even controversy. When you stand to speak upon it, you must be absolutely confident of its structural integrity. (chap. 6)

What are the implications of this metaphor? Its very familiarity may suggest that it has archetypal roots, that it may somehow express a basic communication motive. That motive, I suggest, is to shape the world to our needs and purposes - - to impose order and purpose upon the chaos that surrounds us. This deep human impulse creates an instructional imperative as well: we need to give our students the gift of a sense of form. The arts of designing and building speeches, of learning the nature and range of supporting materials and what they can best support, the strategies of outlining - - all are central to this gift. Understanding the orderly development of ideas is surely central to that awareness we call a liberal education.

A second metaphor to emerge in our manuscript is at first glance more surprising: **the student as weaver**. Our students practice the art of weaving symbols into the fabric of a speech and evidence and proof into the tapestry of powerful arguments. They encounter the power of language in their own speeches, and must learn the techniques that make that power work. This introduction to "the loom of language" is related to the classical tendency to think of language as the clothing of thought. But the weaving metaphor is a more dynamic and productive expression of that theme. It helps students understand that speaking is (or ought to be) creative, and helps them realize the importance of certain vital tests - - such as clarity, color, concreteness, and simplicity - - that apply to the strands of the fabric they fashion. Moreover, they can see the practical importance of such creative uses of symbols around them every day.

Recently, while we were visiting at Pepperdine University, we affirmed that truism quite by accident. The morning of our presentation, I picked up the copy of USA Today that had been shoved under our hotel door, and began idly reading. The reader may recall that at one point in the Republican presidential primary campaign of 1996, Steve Forbes emerged as a leading contender, and other candidates were taking shots at him. One of those candidates of the moment, Senator Phil Gramm of Texas, criticized Forbes' proposal of a flat tax on grounds that it would favor the wealthy by eliminating taxes on dividend and interest income. Said Gramm, "I reject the idea that income derived from labor should be taxed and that income derived from capital should not." (p. 4A)

A nice use of contrast, but look how candidate Pat Buchanan expressed the same idea: "Under Forbes' plan, lounge lizards in Palm Beach would pay a lower tax rate than steelworkers in Youngstown." (p. 4A) Later he added that Forbes' plan had been drawn up by "the boys down at the yacht basin." While Gramm's words are a study in abstraction, Buchanan's language is colorful and concrete. The use of the animal metaphor, "lounge lizards," is striking. So also is the use of contrast, setting the "lounge lizards" against the steelworkers, Palm Beach versus Youngstown. It's sloth and privilege against character and virtue, and we know which side Buchanan is on. Whatever else one might think of him, Buchanan in these instances was a skilled weaver of words.

Woven also into the texture of an oral message is a rich paralanguage of gesture, voice, costume and staging, everything from the clothes we wear to the background photographs we display or music we play to affirm our message. Our students learn to work the loom of these many languages to design an effective message for their listeners.

We also teach our students how to weave evidence into proofs, and proofs into compelling arguments. The system Susie and I introduce, based on Aristotelian principles augmented by scholarship over the last generation, ties elements of proof to basic elements of human identity: Thus the **logos** reflects that we are -- or like to think we are -- thinking animals who must have our doubts dispelled before we buy into any position. The appeal of **pathos** reflects that we are also creatures of feeling who are susceptible to anger, sympathy, fear, and all the other great emotions that give color to our humanity. **Ethos**, proof arising from our impressions of the character, competence, attractiveness, and forcefulness of speakers, reflects our need for leadership as we wander through this life. Finally, our notion of **mythos** affirms that we are also social creatures who gain much of our identity from the groups that we form (M. Osborn, 1979, 1986). Proofs that tap into the traditions, legends, heroes and heroines of the groups that nourish our social nature can be quite powerful.

As our students learn how to weave a fabric that intermeshes these various elements of proof, they are also learning how to appeal to the very essence of what it means to be human. And this also is no small gift.

Now what are the implications of this second metaphor? I believe they underscore the neglected importance of creativity in the basic course. I would emphasize that public speaking nourishes - - or ought to nourish - - creativity in students. And here I think many of us may have missed a golden opportunity. We hear a lot about creative writing, and what it can do for students, but we hear very little about creative speaking. Creative speaking encourages originality of language, thought, and expression as students explore themselves and their worlds in classroom speeches. Unlike creative writing, which is usually quite private, creative speaking is a public, interactive experience, generated by speakers and listeners together, a deeply satisfying pleasure that is communal. A new emphasis on creative speaking could go along with our renewed interest in the importance of narrative, telling stories that engage listeners, reveal the speaker's humanity, and embody important values and ideals. I think we need to give more attention to this idea of creative speaking as a goal and a justification of the basic public speaking class.

The metaphors of building and weaving are both instrumental. As we master them, they make possible a third metaphor that arose quite surprisingly in our manuscript. This metaphor, that expresses the personal challenge of communicating, is **the student as climber**. This metaphor emphasizes the interference element of the traditional communication model. It recognizes that both speakers and listeners often raise barriers between them that, on the one hand, protect them from the risk of communication, and on the other, prevent them from enjoying its benefits. What are these barriers?

They are based, first, on speaker's fears. Beginning speakers, troubled by the strangeness of their first speaking experiences, often picture listeners as distant, unfriendly, or threatening. There has been, of course, valuable work with cognitive restructuring, systematic desensitization, and visualization techniques to combat such fears (Fremouw & Scott, 1979; Friedrich & Goss, 1984; Ayres & Hopf, 1989; Hopf & Ayres, 1992; Ayres, 1995; Ayres, Hopf, & Ayres, 1994), but perhaps we need to focus these techniques even more on picturing a friendlier, warmer, more receptive audience.

Another high barrier rises out of listeners' suspicions. In this time of cynicism and distrust, listeners may fear hidden agendas. They may be suspicious of a speaker's motives, cautious about accepting messages, or concerned that what a speaker asks of them may be costly or risky. But tragically, they may also fear the change, even the growth, that can result from genuine communication. They may believe that even desirable change can have unpredictable consequences that will present them with problems. Or, of course, they may have been wounded by some previous communication encounter.

Listeners may also be indifferent to a message or distracted by other concerns. Worries over money or an upcoming test, or dreams about the weekend ahead, can further block communication.

Finally, there are the high barriers of culture. What Kenneth Burke called identification (1950/1962) has come to describe the crisis of our time. Stereotypes that can block us from joining in any genuine way with those of a different race, gender, or lifestyle clutter our heads. When that happens, as Suzanne has noted in a recent paper (1996), the rhetoric of division overwhelms any attempt at identification. And that is the stuff of communication tragedy.

As these barriers of fear, suspicion, indifference, distraction, and cultural prejudice combine, they form what we call Interference Mountain (1997, chap. 1). But we can help our students climb such mountains, especially as they master the complex skills of building and weaving. And that is perhaps the greatest gift of our course. It takes the best efforts of speakers and listeners to meet successfully at the summit of Interference Mountain. The pleasant thing to realize is that Interference Mountain is a magic mountain. As we climb, it recedes. Communication anxiety ebbs, trust starts to replace suspicion, involvement overcomes indifference, and respect reduces prejudice. Gradually the mountain we at first perceived transforms into a smaller and smaller hill. And those who stand astride it will have grown larger as they climbed.

It is interesting to note how this way of thinking about the personal challenge of the public speaking class is also rooted in an archetype: the sense of vertical space that dramatizes the striving of human life, as we attempt to lift our situation and to grow, and also the risk of that effort, as we place ourselves in danger of falling (M. Osborn, 1969, 1976). This archetypal grounding of the public speaking class simply confirms again that our course connects with the needs and desires of our students in a fundamental way.

The metaphor of student as climber expresses vividly a transformational approach to the public speaking class. Students - - both speakers and listeners - - grow and develop rapidly when the course works successfully. Moreover, their horizons expand as well, signalling the impact of successful communication on what Bitzer has called "public knowledge" (1978). Now, admittedly, the figurative conception of the student as climber is influenced by ideas already explored in interpersonal and intercultural communication, although the titles of several popular textbooks in these areas may signal a preference for another apt metaphor, that of the bridge (Gudykunst, Ting-Toomey, Sudweeks & Stewart, 1995; Stewart, 1995). This may simply indicate that the basic public speaking course of the future will borrow increasingly from and even blend with useful elements from these allied studies. It is our creative challenge to explore how this synergistic blend can best occur in the particular university setting in which we find ourselves teaching.

Now let's look at our three metaphors together, because they reveal, I believe, the heart of our course, the treasure of its cultural legacy, that we must guard as we move into a new century. I submit that if we can teach students how to build ideas, weave symbols and evidence, and climb the barriers that separate them, we are doing more than teaching

them how to speak: we are teaching them how to live. One other implication is clear: if we are to seek such goals, we must be careful not to define our subject too narrowly. Especially, we should avoid confining ourselves to a superficial skills orientation. It's that kind of orientation that can trivialize all that we do, especially in the unfriendly eyes of some colleagues in other departments, and can make us vulnerable when the pressure to cut programs arises. In this sense lofty educational goals may not only be ethically attractive: they may also be quite practical.

Finally, it is interesting to view the three metaphors in relation to other recent investigations of the metaphors of communication education. The kind of personal growth experience the three metaphors encourage and guide is profoundly humanizing: as such, they can serve as an antidote to the dehumanizing implications of the consumer metaphor in undergraduate education critiqued recently by McMillan and Cheney (1996). On the other hand, the course and learning they imply serve to facilitate the vision of undergraduate experience dreamed metaphorically by the students tested by Jorgensen-Earp and Staton (1993). You may remember that these students saw college education as a chance to grow, to rise, to become engaged with others; in their less secure moments they feared being "cut adrift," of becoming "isolated" and "small." More than university administrators or even their instructors, they saw the college learning experience as "an evolving perspective . . . concerned more with the process taking place than with the product being created." The public speaking course, as it teaches the skills necessary to build and weave successful lives and to climb above human estrangement, can once again assume its place at the center of liberal education - - as it helps bring such student dreams to life. As Rod Hart has put it, "Communication is the ultimate people-making discipline." (p. 101).

Some years ago (1990), I responded to an attack on our discipline in The Chronicle of Higher Education. In my rebuttal to some quite unjust insinuations, I insisted that our classes provide "a form of empowerment that teaches people how to use language ethically and effectively so that they may exercise their freedom responsibly" (p. B2). Our look into the basic metaphors of such empowerment suggests that we should be able to defend our classes on profound personal as well as social grounds. We are not the first to envision such lofty goals: it was Cicero who insisted in his De Oratore that in teaching public speaking, we must develop the character and culture, as well as the fluency, of our students. Perhaps these stars may sometimes seem beyond our reach, but we must not cease grasping for them. The Oglala Sioux people have a saying that may guide us: "the ability to make a good speech is a great gift to the people from their maker, Owner of all things." As we move into the twenty-first century, we should pursue our work in that sacral spirit.

NOTES

1. This presentation is a revision of the keynote address presented at the Midwest Basic Course Directors Conference in Biloxi in February, 1996. A version of it will appear in Basic Communication Course Annual 9.

REFERENCES

Ayres, J. (1995). Comparing Self-constructed Visualization Scripts with Guided Visualization. Communication Reports, 8, 193-199.

Ayres, J. & Hopf, T. S. (1989). Visualization: Is It More Than Extra-Attention? Communication Education, 38, 1–5.

Ayres, J., Hopf, T. & Ayres, D. M. (1994). An Examination of Whether Imaging Ability Enhances the Effectiveness of an Intervention Designed to Reduce Speech Anxiety. Communication Education, 43, 252-258.

Bitzer, L. F. (1978). Rhetoric and Public Knowledge. In D. M. Burks (Ed.), Rhetoric, Philosophy, and Literature: An Exploration (pp. 67-93). West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press.

Burke, K. (1935/1984). Permanence and Change, An Anatomy of Purpose. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Burke, K. (1950/1962). A Rhetoric of Motives. New York: World.

Fremouw, W. J. & Scott, M. D. (1979). Cognitive Restructuring: An Alternative Method for the Treatment of Communication Apprehension. Communication Education, 28, 129–133.

Friedrich, G. & Goss, B. (1984). Systematic Desensitization. In J. A. Daly & J. C. McCroskey (Eds.), Avoiding Communication: Shyness, Reticence, and Communication Apprehension (pp. 173-188). Beverly Hills, Calif.: Sage.

Griffin, L. (1960). The Edifice Metaphor in Rhetorical Theory. Speech Monographs, 27, 279-292.

Gudykunst, W. B., Ting-Toomey, S., Sudweeks, S. & Stewart, L. P. (1995). Building Bridges: Interpersonal Skills for a Changing World. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Hall, M. (1996, January 18). In Tax Debate, Flat Is Where It's At. USA Today, p. 4A.

Hart, R. P. (1993). Why Communication? Why Education? Toward a Politics of Teaching. Communication Education, 42, 97-105.

Hopf, T. & Ayres, J. (1992). Coping with Public Speaking Anxiety: An Examination of Various Combinations of Systematic Desensitization, Skills Training, and Visualization. Journal of Applied Communication Research, 20, 183–198.

Jorgensen-Earp, C. R. & Staton, A. Q. (1993). Students Metaphors for the College Freshman Experience. Communication Education, 42, 123-141.

Lakoff, G. & Johnson, M. (1980). Metaphors We Live By. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

McMillan, J. J. & Cheney, G. (1996). The Student as Consumer: The Implications and Limitations of a Metaphor. Communication Education, 45, 1-15.

Osborn, M. (1976). Orientations to Rhetorical Style. Chicago: SRA.

Osborn, M. (1979). Our Communication Heritage: The Genetic Tie That Binds. Southern Speech Communication Journal, 44, 147-58.

Osborn, M. (1986). Rhetorical Depiction. In H. W. Simons & A. A. Aghazarian (Eds.), Form, Genre and the Study of Political Discourse (pp. 79-107). Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press.

Osborn, M. (1990, January 17). The Study of Communication Flourishes in a Democratic Environment. The Chronicle of Higher Education, pp. B2-B3.

Osborn, M. (1969). Vertical Symbolism in the Speeches of Edmund Burke. Studies in Burke and His Time, 10, 1232-38.

Osborn, M., & Osborn, S. (1997). Public Speaking (4th ed.). Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Osborn, S. (1996, March). The Rhetorical Depiction of HIV/AIDS. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Southern States Communication Association, Memphis, TN.

Richards, I. A. (1936). The Philosophy of Rhetoric. New York: Oxford University Press.

Stewart, J. (1995). Bridges Not Walls: A Book About Interpersonal Communication (6th ed.). New York: McGraw-Hill.